

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH GENERAL JOHN KELLY, COMMANDING GENERAL, MULTINATIONAL FORCE-WEST VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ SUBJECT: AN UPDATE ON PROGRESS IN AL ANBAR PROVINCE TIME: 10:02 A.M. EDT DATE: FRIDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2008

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): All right, Captain, we can get started here. Whenever the general's ready, we'll get rolling.

CPT. : Okay, I'll hand the phone over right now.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you very much.

GEN. KELLY: Hey, this General Kelly.

MR. HOLT: All right. General Kelly, thank you very much for joining us, sir. And we may have some other folks join us on the line as we get going here. But we appreciate you joining us for the bloggers roundtable. And thank you very much. GEN. KELLY: Sure, a pleasure.

MR. HOLT: And somebody else joining us there. Who is there?

Q Jared Fisher's on.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Jared, thanks.

Do you have an opening statement for us, sir?

GEN. KELLY: Well, just a couple of comments really. As I think most people know anyway, we turned the Anbar province over last month to the Iraqis, something called PIC, or provincial Iraqi control. That essentially turned over the prime responsibility for the security of the province to the Iraqis. And you know, we remain here still in force. There's over 25,000 Marines and some additional other service members here, so for a total of about 27,000 U.S.

And we really stand now in overwatch. We support them when they need help, but they've pretty much got it and are running with the ball. And we have, you know, kind of proudly stood back and watched them do their thing. We do still provide them some intelligence although, frankly, they provide us very useful intelligence that they're able to gain through their operations.

Part of the turnover, at least here in Anbar province, part of that turnover, we kind of term it the last 10 yards of this fight. The last 10 yards

really, in my estimation, really are in the hands of the Iraqi government themselves and the Iraqi people. And the people, frankly, here in Anbar are very quick to help themselves, and we're just trying to make the connection between Anbar province which is overwhelmingly Sunni with the Baghdad government.

They've never done this before. They've always been a dictatorship or a very tight socialist organization. They've never done this, so they're working it out. They're doing a pretty good job. And as I say, the last 10 yards of the game here belong to the Iraqi government, particularly the government in Baghdad.

And I would just offer just one other comment that Anbar, the fight's not over. It's still a dangerous place. The AQI, that is al Qaeda, has been all but defeated. They're no longer an insurgency primarily because they no longer have any support of the local people. They still exist in the province as individual cells, very loosely organized. "Organized" is too strong a word even.

So the insurgency is dead, but al Qaeda still has, like a snake when you cut its head off, has still got a little bit of bite and a little bit of venom. But all in all, the Iraqi security forces, that's the police and the army, are doing a great job staying on top of it.

I think I'll let it go there and just take questions. MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

Andrew, you were first online, so why don't you get us started.

Q General Kelly, Andrew Lubin here from -- (inaudible). How are you this evening, sir?

GEN. KELLY: Andrew, doing well.

Q Good. General, a quick question. When I was down in (el Aswin ?) a couple of weeks ago, I was chatting with my friends in (RTT 5 ?). And they're chasing criminals. Why can't we make this an ISF program and just bring 25,000 Marines up to Afghanistan where they're probably needed more?

GEN. KELLY: Well, if I understand the question, the fact is that Anbar province, you know, used to be the most dangerous province in the country, primarily because of al Qaeda. But it's not an island. It's part of an overall fight that's still going on. Al Qaeda is, as I say, defeated as an insurgency; however, there is still an al Qaeda insurgency in other parts of the country.

If we were to leave here without, you know, continuing to prop the army, the police as well as, frankly, the civil authorities -- the mayors, the governors and all who are still learning to do their job as government people -- if we were to pull those props out too early, that would, I think, be problematic. So it's not quite time to withdraw, particularly since, again, Anbar province is part of a country that has still, in some parts of the country -- Mosul and Baghdad as an example -- has still got quite an insurgency on its hands being pushed back every day, being beaten down every day. And the successes are pretty good. But now is not the time to depart.

I mean, someone would have to -- if we left, if Marines left here, someone would have to take our place because we certainly do provide a sense of

security for the locals here in Anbar. As they work things out amongst themselves in the province between, say, the political parties, you know, the regional agendas within the province as well as the province working things out amongst themselves and the national government, we provide just a, you know, as I say a stability presence that goes a long way. And you can't really put a value on it other than to say it needs to remain.

I don't know if that answers your question, Andrew.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Jared.

Q Yes, sir. Thank you for your service. Could you talk a little bit about, you know, you mentioned the progress on the security front. Could you talk a little bit about the progress on the economic and the political front within the people and the kadas and the nahias that you work in? GEN. KELLY: Sure. On the political front, as you may or may not know, this province -- overwhelmingly Sunni, probably 99 percent -- essentially boycotted the last election. I think something on the order of 3 percent voted, and that was, what, three years ago. We just had voter registration throughout the province. It was a 30-day process. We advised the police and the army and the governor and the other civil officials on how to do it. But they executed it entirely on their own. There wasn't a single security event, nor was there a single accusation of any type of, you know, cooking the books, if you will.

That process went on for 30 days. And we had as close to 100 percent voter registration as you can get. So that tells you where they are on this upcoming election which this province is looking forward to probably more than any other province because they have a lot of heartburn with a lot of the politicians that are in right now, just like we in America have the same kind of political heartburn with people who we don't agree with.

So they really want to, you know, make their voices heard, so 100 percent voter registration.

I would expect on the 31st, I think, is the target date now for the election, we'll have a major, you know, close to 100 percent turnout then. And right now, it's pretty interesting to watch because there's two major parties and probably seven or eight smaller parties. Certainly there will be more of a coalition that will come out of this rather than an overwhelming win on the part of one party or another.

So that's the political front, and it's working very well. They've been very patient. They were starting to get a little antsy over the fact that the election that was supposed to go in October was in question. But now it looks pretty good for January, and they're pretty happy with that.

On the economic front, they will tell you, if you ask them what hurts them most economically, they will not tell you that the United States invasion and the coalition invasion. They will tell you that the United Nations sanctions for 11 years is what has crippled the country economically. They hold a fair amount of animosity towards the United Nations, that period of time.

And because of the food-for-oil -- and I'm not criticizing the policy at all, I'm just saying this is what they think and this is what happened. Because the food-for-oil policy worked, that pretty much took agriculture, at least in this province, and destroyed it because the farmers were no longer

required to grow food because the food was essentially issued by the government as purchased from the oil-for-food program.

We've done an awful lot. And it's an overwhelmingly rural province. I think 60 percent of the employment in the province, if it was working and running, would be rural. These are very small farms, by the way. But we've done a lot -- "we" meaning the coalition and the Marines that are here -- we've done a great deal to stimulate the agricultural development, as an example. You don't have to do much for these people. They're very, very hardworking people, and they're appreciative of everything we do.

As an example, I just purchased about one-third of all of the seed and one-third of all of the fertilizer they will need to plant here next month for the wheat crop which is the big crop here. That will employ a great many people. On the harder, on the more industrial side, economic front, there wasn't a huge amount of industrial production here, but what was here, again the U.N. sanctions in particular, has all but wiped it out.

So we have, not just the coalition, we've got investment from around the world, not only Arab countries but, you know, countries throughout the region and throughout the world who are beginning to invest here. Why? Because the security situation is so good.

We have people now that (we're ?) flying in from Oman, Jordan, as an example, or people that are from Anbar province, businessmen, who will fly to Oman, Jordan and will link them up with private investors. We have three very, very large cement factories here, as an example, employ 7(,000) or 8,000 people each. Some European investors have come in, and they've got a joint partnership with the government of Iraq. There's a very, very large, recently discovered oil and gas field here in Anbar province that we're very confident that outside investors will come in and develop.

So we've got about a 40 percent official unemployment rate here. But we're chipping away at that every day through, you know, as I say, infusion of funds. And not a great deal of money, frankly, but an infusion of funds into repairing the industry that was either, you know, kind of wiped out in the U.N. sanction period or some war damage. But frankly, with the exception of the industrial park area in Fallujah, there wasn't a great deal of war damage done to this province and certainly nothing that would have catastrophically wiped out an industry.

So it's coming along, but we've got a long way to go. But the government of Iraq now is starting to invest, and I am spending less and less U.S. money. And that's a decision I made about six months ago, spending less and less U.S. money in the province, working the government in Baghdad very, very hard to get money out of them to invest. And that's increasing.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

Somebody else has joined us. Andrew, was that you coming back on?

Q Yeah, that was me. I was finally able to come back on.

MR. HOLT: All right. Okay. So do you have any follow-up questions?

Q Well, actually, I do, if I could finish. General, if somebody asked you this before, I apologize. Those cement factories, are they in

operation? And can you give us the status of the big ceramics and glass factory in Ramadi?

GEN. KELLY: I can. And this is Andrew, right?

Q Yes, sir. GEN. KELLY: Okay. The cement factory, I think they never entirely shut down. As a state-owned industry, they kind of kept people coming to work and paid them a fraction of their paychecks to just kind of come to work, but there was very little produced.

All in all, with the investment as an example in one of the factories, there's a Romanian company or bank or something that has invested. And of course, they want it up and running fast. And there is plenty of raw product for them here. We've repaired the rail lines, as an example, that would bring in that raw material from the border region down around a place called Akashat, as an example. So I think it won't be an overnight thing, but I certainly think within the next several months, the cement factories will be up and running.

And you had one -- there's another good example of a refinery that is up near the city of Haditha. That refinery had been closed down for years. We helped with government of Iraq funds as well as some U.S. money, we helped repair a rail line between the city of Haditha, the refinery there, and the source for crude oil, which is in Beiji about 100 miles away. We've repaired the rail line. We've put that refinery in operation, about half of it in operation, one-third of it really. And it's making about 5,000 barrels a day of refined product and put a couple of thousand people to work almost overnight. We opened it up about six weeks ago.

And there's another section of that refinery that will produce another 10,000 barrels a day. But we felt it was important to get one-third up first, so we concentrated on that.

There's a very, very large phosphate factory that we're very close to having private investors sign on the dotted line. When I say "we" I mean the government of Iraq.

But we out here in MNF-West facilitate a lot of these individuals because they contact businessmen within the province as opposed to, say, Baghdad. Then they ask us for help to either bring the businessmen in or we'll bring businessmen from Anbar out to Jordan to make the linkup.

Did that answer, Andrew?

Q Yes, sir. What about the ceramics plant in Ramadi? Is that one open yet?

GEN. KELLY: Yeah, it is not. As you know, the ceramics factory is not too bad. The glass factory is still problematic because it's my understanding when it stopped producing, the machinery, you know, essentially had the liquid glass in it. And then when they simply turned off the machines and walked away, those machines now are just totally dysfunctional. The ceramic factory is producing at probably, I think, something on the order of about 40 percent now, particularly turning out bathroom-type fixtures and tiles, construction-type tiles. And that shouldn't be too much longer, frankly, but that's another private investment thing.

And of course, the security situation being the way it is, it's, you know, an awful lot of people trying to invest out here. Again, I'm not a businessman, but it seems like every single person that lives in Anbar is, to some degree, a businessman. And they're very, very big not only in the big state-type industries, ceramic factories and what not, but they all have a good idea to build a better mousetrap it seems. And they seem to have great ways to network outside the country. And that's where kind of we come in to facilitate a lot of this, you know, linking up people that have money and good ideas.

Q Yeah, they're an entrepreneurial people. Did the ceramics factory have a joint-venture partner? Or are they still doing this on their own?

GEN. KELLY: They're still doing this government of Iraq on their own.

Q Okay.

GEN. KELLY: And as I say, not doing too bad. In fact, when we had the ceremony for provincial Iraqi control last month, they did a little trade show. And lining the streets where they had parades and what not, lining the streets they had all of these toilets and, you know, Western style and Arabic toilets and these really kind of elaborate bathroom sinks and things like that along the street. It was kind of funny. But they were out there, you know, advertising their wares. But it's still a state-owned industry right now, Andrew.

Q Jack, can I ask another one since I dropped off before?

MR. HOLT: Okay, go ahead.

Q Great. General, you had the bank open now in (Karma ?). Are there any other banks open now in the other cities?

GEN. KELLY: There are banks open. And you probably know this but for the group, there's banks open, but the banking industry is still very, to say the least, fledgling. When I first got here -- I've been here eight months -- when we first arrived, we were still in the business -- "we" meaning coalition forces, Marines -- we were still in the business of going up to Baghdad, as an example, and picking up in large helicopters, 53s, and every month we'd bring in pallet after pallet after pallet of tens of billions of dinar. And we'd bring them in -- it's very much a cash economy. So bringing the dinar in and then distribute it into the banks so that people that are paid in cash and vouchers and things like that, there's still really no electronic in this province. Although, as I understand it, it's picking up in the south and in Baghdad itself. There's still no real electronic transfers. Checks are still not very widely used at all. What happens is if you get paid, you are paid in cash essentially.

The police, as an example -- there's 28,000 police in Anbar province -- the police chief goes, picks up the money to pay 28,000 officers and then, just like in the old Marine Corps, Army, Navy, Air Force, they're paid individually in cash. We don't have to go that money transfer anymore. We turned it over to the Iraqi army, and then they turned it over to the Iraqi police. And that's been without incident.

But no, the banks, as we know it, don't exist. There are banks, and you can put money in the bank, and you can go get money out of that bank. But the idea, as an example, of putting money in a bank here in Anbar and then

having someone able to, say, withdraw funds in Mosul or Baghdad, you're in and out of the same bank.

Q Okay, thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Jared.

Q Yes, sir. Another follow up. Can you talk a little bit about the training of the ISF, the Marine Corps helping to overwatch? Maybe talk a little bit about the training academies, how the IP is doing, the national guard, just trying to cement the gains we've already had for the next five to 10 years, talk about the plans we've got for that, please.

GEN. KELLY: Sure, Jared. One of the things, both three years ago and now -- and most people will remember the chatter, back in Washington in particular, had to do with why weren't the police and why weren't the army doing better or doing anything, frankly, in Iraq. I think sometimes people forget that three years ago there really wasn't an army. We disbanded it. So there was a little bit of criticism that wasn't really due the army at the time.

But in any event, obviously people started to talk about the exit strategy from Iraq -- would certainly revolve around the development of the police and the army, in particular.

And there's various types of police. There's national police and others, but let's just use that one term, police and army.

Here in the province, the Marine commanders at the time took a look at the requirement and, really, quadrupled it. So that when we started to put trainers with the police and the army, it was a huge investment for the Marine Corps, because these were not privates and PFCs that we were putting in front of the police and the army. They were captains and majors and senior NCOs.

But it really -- and they lived with them 24/7 which, at the time, was somewhat criticized, I think, because we didn't know whether these guys were going to turn on us. But we made the adviser groups big enough so that they could live with the battalions, the brigades, the divisions, and live inside the police stations. And if there was any dastardly acts or whatever, treachery, they'd be big enough to defend themselves.

But we had virtually none of that and never have had any of that. So that investment, that huge investment in numbers and in talent have paid off.

The two Iraqi Army divisions that came out of this province are absolutely the two best divisions in the Iraqi Army. And, in fact, in March, 60 percent of the Iraqi Army units from Anbar, with their Marine advisers, left the province and have carried most of the weight, or have done an awful lot of good work, if you will, in Basra.

And they're still in Basra, in fact, keeping a lid on that place. They're fighting in Diyala with the Marine trainers. They're in Sadr City. So they've really been used by the government of Iraq as kind of a fire brigade, and they have done very, very well in every instance.

The Iraqi police -- I've got over -- right at about 121 Iraqi police stations. Three years ago we had a Marine unit in every one of those police

stations 24/7. At the time, it was us encouraging the Iraqi police to go out on patrol with us. It was a very dangerous time, as you know.

The relationship was them going on patrol with us. When I got here eight months ago, that was shifted to us going on patrol with them. And now, increasingly, I have stepped back from the police. I only have, out of the 121 police stations, I'm now down to 30. I have Marines in 30 stations.

I have mobile training teams that go to those other stations, but we're reducing the number because we're simply not needed anymore.

In fact, the real training -- we've switched from combat-type training and counterinsurgency training with the police; we've switched, really, to protect-and-serve-type training.

That's why we've developed special training teams. Some of them, mostly made up, actually, of contracted great Americans from -- they're retired police officers from all over America that have come out here to help.

And they go around and teach them these kind of protect-and-serve things -- how to interrogate people the right way; ethics in police work; how to preserve a crime scene; investigate an accident; weapons training, that kind of thing.

So the training that we were able to give them, primarily infantry training, they've got it. They go out on patrol by themselves; they know what they're doing. And now we're backing away. We're in overwatch. We provide them help if they need it, when they call. But we're not the Johnny-on-the-spots anymore; they are.

And the long-term plan is to continue the professionalization of the police. As I said, we have 28,000 in the district. About 14,000 of them are trained in the 10-week-long Iraqi training academy.

What we've done, because there's just not enough seats as we've expanded the numbers, what we've done in the province is put together a three-week training package that we originally started in three locations in the province.

We've now turned those over to the Iraqi police. And they get about -- the new guys, or the untrained guys, get about three weeks of police-specific training and then we get them out on the street. And then over time, we think about two years, the rest of that 14,000 will rotate and then we'll have 100 percent trained.

Something else we did -- and the women are not typically -- well, in this particular country, never were part of the police. We had a rising trend in female suicide bombers about eight, nine -- well, actually, six, seven, eight months ago. And of course culturally we don't want to search women. Certainly men don't search women at all. Marines certainly don't ever search women. We had female Marines doing it. That was still a little resentful to the local Iraqi ladies, just because of the differences in Western and all. So we hired something that we call Daughters of Iraq, a very small number of them. But we put them at our entry control points around various cities. I think there's probably 60 or 70 of them.

We pay them 90 bucks a month, which is not a bad living wage here, particularly for the kind of work they do. And originally, the police were a little bit concerned about the fact that we were using women as police -- not as police, but using them with the police. But now they're very well accepted.

In fact, the police departments are very in favor of it because, again, the suicide, the female vest bomber is not a prevalent threat, but it is a real threat. And just having these ladies in their uniforms standing there doing these searches have deterred, we believe, the -- at least here in Anbar province, have deterred the suicide bombers, particularly the females. So that's worked out well.

So as I say, on the police, it'll be an ongoing -- at least two more years, as they train up. But the -- they've got it, relaly, and we watch them pretty closely, and we still are with them a lot in terms of planning and training and all of that.

But day-to-day, week-to-week in the cities, IED goes off -- and there's not many IEDs anymore, but an IED goes off, the police are there first. They typically call us for the forensics part of the investigation. But they're pretty much on their own and doing well.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you very much. I know we're about out of time. Do you have any closing comments or closing thoughts for us?

GEN. LYNCH: I don't, other than -- you have an awful lot of great folks over here, both in and out of uniform, that are working very, very hard.

And I just got back off two weeks of R and R leave myself. Saw very, very, very little reporting about Iraq back in the States, and that's a good thing because there's not much negative happening here.

But there is a job yet to be done here, and it's not a war quite over. But increasingly, every day, really, turning it over to the Iraqis. They're working things out amongst themselves. There is still a Sunni-Shi'a divide. There's a Kurdish divide. But they seem to be getting their arms around that.

And if Anbar -- which was overwhelmingly the most dangerous place on Earth a year, 15 months ago -- if Anbar can turn and look very much forward to an election, I think any problem on this Earth is solvable. We just need to stay with it a little while longer. We owe the Iraqis that much, and I think we owe the kids that have been killed over here the same. So, I'll let it go at that.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much. Thank you for joining us today for the Bloggers Roundtable.

GEN. LYNCH: Sure. Take care.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir. Semper Fi.

Q Hey, General, thanks for the time. Great.

Thanks, Jack. Appreciate it.

MR. HOLT: You bet.

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